



BRIEFING: NOVEMBER 7, 2013 BOARD MEETING AGENDA ITEM #2

TO: Chairman Richard and Board Members

FROM: Diana Gomez, Central Valley Regional Director
Mark A. McLoughlin, Director of Environmental Services

DATE: November 7, 2013

RE: Consideration of the Staff Recommended Preferred Alignment for the Fresno to Bakersfield Project Section

Background

At the April 2013 Board Meeting, California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority) staff presented a preliminary recommendation on the Preferred Alternative for the Fresno to Bakersfield Project Section. This recommendation included components of several alternatives and parts of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad (BNSF) Alternative. After reviewing staff reports and receiving public input, the Board directed staff to continue evaluating a Preferred Alternative and seek further public input and the broad environmental, social, and economic implications of the project alternatives in addition to the requirements of resource-specific environmental regulations.

Discussion

Since April, Authority staff has conducted additional evaluation of project alternatives and environmental criteria. This effort was bolstered by additional public outreach activities throughout impacted communities. As a result of this work, staff has revised its recommendation for a Preferred Alternative for the Fresno to Bakersfield Project Section.

The current staff-recommended Preferred Alternative consists of parts of the BNSF Alternative, the Corcoran Bypass Alternative, the Allensworth Bypass Alternative, and the Bakersfield Hybrid Alternative. It also includes a station in downtown Fresno on Mariposa Street, a station in downtown Bakersfield on Truxtun Avenue, and a station site east of Hanford/west of Visalia on State Route 198 to be developed when ridership demand warrants it.

The Statewide Program Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement for the California High-Speed Rail Project identified the BNSF Railway corridor as the preferred corridor for high-speed rail between Fresno and Bakersfield, and the Authority and FRA selected the BNSF Railway corridor for further evaluation in project studies. Within this corridor, alternative refined alignments were subsequently identified in the Hanford, Corcoran, Allensworth, Wasco-Shafter, and Bakersfield areas.

The staff recommended preferred alternative is based on several findings made by staff through the course of these efforts, including:

- In the Hanford/Visalia area, the BNSF Alternative around the east side of the city has the fewest impacts to wetlands and natural upland habitat, and it is more compatible with Hanford's future growth plans than the Hanford West Bypass alternatives. The BNSF Alternative is closer to State Route 99 and the Kings/Tulare Regional Station East Alternative would be closer to the higher population centers of Hanford and Visalia.
- In the Corcoran area, the Corcoran Bypass impacts the fewest total acres of waters of the United States.
- In the Allensworth area, the Allensworth Bypass impacts the fewest acres of wetlands and other waters of the United States, natural habitat, and farmlands and, unlike the BNSF Alternative through Allensworth, it does not impact the Allensworth State Historic Park and the Allensworth Ecological Reserve, both of which are properties protected by Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 public historic site and wildlife refuge respectively.
- In the Wasco-Shafter area, the BSNF Alternative through these communities is favored by regional and local interests, is consistent with long-term development plans in Shafter, allows more agricultural land to be kept in Williamson Act contracts, and would have fewer construction cost uncertainties associated with building the project in an active and developing oil and gas field.
- The Bakersfield Hybrid Alternative would impact the fewest acres of quality aquatic habitat along the Kern River, it would impact the fewest religious facilities, cause the fewest residential displacements, and it would not impact the Bakersfield High School campus and Bethel Christian School.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board concur with the Preferred Alternative recommended by the staff for the purpose of staff preparing the Bakersfield to Fresno section Final EIR/EIS. The Board is not adopting or approving the staff-recommended Preferred Alternative at this time or committing to do so in the future. Staff will submit this alternative to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Environmental Protection Agency and, with their concurrence that it is the preliminary Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative as defined in Section 404(b)(1) of the Clean Water Act, will prepare the Final EIR/EIS. The Board will make a final decision about alignments and stations only after issuance of the Final EIR/EIS in early 2014.

Attachments

- Resolution #HSRA 13-30
- Fresno to Bakersfield Staff Recommendation: Preferred Alternative